

COULD ETHICS BE CHRISTIAN?

James Gustafson, in his book, Can Ethics Be Christian?, suggests that ethics does not permit "private" or "particular" historical or religious interests; ethics is ethics only when the basic criterion of judgment is whether all rational and disinterested persons could agree on the principles developed.¹

From one perspective, it would seem to me that given this basis, there truly is no such thing as Christian ethics, and particularly, since ethics obeys rules which are essentially non-Christian and possibly even de-Christian (As opposed to anti-Christian, I am using de-Christian to suggest that obeying the ethical rules might even tend to make a person less of a Christian.) these ideas have no place in Christianity today, except as historical detritus, while they might have had validity in a prior age with different norms for what constituted "the good life," thus sharing Charles Curran's insight that Catholic theology has come to see the need for an historical understanding in its approach.²

From a second perspective, it would also seem that given what medieval Christianity did with the ethical methods, particularly in dealing with "natural law", and given what the disciplines of modern psychology, sociology, and anthropology teach about what is "natural", Christianity continued to use the methods of philosophical ethics to produce a stepchild, or maybe even a bastard, whose name, unfortunately, seems to be Christian ethics, which is neither Christian nor ethical. Philosophical ethics, however, should be restricted to the formal task of establishing the validity of ethical experience and not dealing with concrete ethics such as Christian ethics. To attempt to mix them tends to make for (pardon the expression) an abortion. Again, Curran says:

This more historically conscious (moral) theology will tend to have a different concept of "man" -- one that is more open than closed. Human beings are not determined by a fixed nature existing within. The genius of the human being in all generations has been the ability for self-creation and self-direction. We are constantly open to a tremendous variety of actions and options. Any theological position based on a closed concept of human nature, something already within, to which one must conform oneself and one's actions, will be an inaccurate understanding of the human reality and tend to result in unacceptable moral conclusions.³

Historicity was the subject of a paper which showed in evolutionary terms how the western world has managed, despite religion, to grow through the six moral stages delineated by Lawrence Kohlberg (based on the work of Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist, in logical and cognitive development). That paper is appended because it is germane to some of the questions, and helps one to understand this author's perspective. Moral theology does not always seem to be aware of the datedness and insularity of its approach. Rahner points out that theology's possibility of error is ultimately rooted in its historical character.⁴

Likewise, current Catholic moral theology seems not to be aware of the stages in moral development and hence, rather than helping people grow into more ethical beings, certain Christian leaders seem determined to hold people at the lower stages of moral development through the time-bound methods of philosophy, rather than bringing them into the current century and assisting in their growth. The question of why this is so presents itself, and an obvious answer, "Because they are more easily controlled that way," seems almost too obvious. It is as though

they were frightened by the idea of a Christian ethic based on forgiveness and love -- considering that the love of which we speak is "total positive regard" or "unconditional love," as modern psychological parlance puts it.

Last winter, for another course, one of the readings assigned was Kolakowski's, Religion, if there is no God... In that book, he makes the statement that, "scholastic methods of supporting religious truth with rational arguments were progressively losing credibility and efficacy, and although the masters of the medieval schools never stopped exercising their semantic and logical skills, they were soon to be regarded as uninteresting remnants of a past age, incapable of competing with, let alone matching, new intellectual trends..."⁵ If it is true that moral theology, as Charles Curran states, is constantly in dialogue with the empirical and social sciences in order to better understand humanity, changes in politics, science, economics, and sociology cannot remain unreflected in approaches to moral theology.⁶ It is unfortunate that the medieval philosophical ethics scholastic-rationalistic methodology which much of moral theology employs can indeed rationalize into acceptability acts and moral concepts which "new intellectual trends," like psychology and sociology, find repugnant. To make this worse, Christian ethicists then place the imprimatur of their denomination on these repugnant concepts, and they are codified for the members of that denomination as reality, as morality, and, even, as ethics.

This is not necessarily good for human beings, is not honest-dealing with the members of Christian denominations, and in the best sense of the word is unethical because it allows us to use semantic and logical games to declare the unseemly good and often the good immoral only because by the tools used, it can be proven; on the other hand, using other tools, the total reverse might be equally good or better.



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If it is true that the task of the ethician is to study the ways in which people make decisions and to point out those choices believed to be right, good, or fitting, it would be assumed that not only ways in which decisions are made, but also the quantifiable moral/ethical level of that decision might be a handy tool by which to test the maturity of one's ethical decisions.

According to Kohlberg, the six levels of moral development are:

1. Heteronomous Morality - To avoid breaking rules backed by punishment, obedience of its own sake, and avoiding physical damage to persons and property.
2. Individualism, Instrumental Purpose and Exchange - Following rules only when it is to someone's immediate interest; acting to meet one's own interest and needs, and letting others do the same. Right is what's fair, what's an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement.
3. Mutual interpersonal Expectations, Relationship and Interpersonal Conformity - Living up to what is expected by people close to you or what people generally expect of people in your role as son/daughter, brother/sister, friend, etc. "Being good" is important and means having good motives, showing concern about others. It also means keeping mutual relationships, such as trust, loyalty, respect and gratitude.
4. Social System and Conscience - Fulfilling the actual duties to which you have agreed. Laws are to be upheld except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties. Right is also contributing to society, the group, the institution.
5. Social Contract or Utility - Being aware that people hold a variety of values and opinions, that most values and rules are relative to your group. These relative rules should usually be upheld, however, in the interest of impartiality and because they are the social contract. Some nonrelative values and rights like life and liberty, however, must be upheld in any society and regardless of majority opinion.

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6. Universal Ethical Principles - Following self-chosen ethical principles. Particular laws or social agreements are usually valid because they rest on such principles. When laws violate these principles one acts in accordance with the principle. Principles are universal principles of justice: the equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

Albert Knudson, prior dean of the Boston University School of Theology, wrote, "The basic elements in the moral law are inherent in the human mind and in the structure of human society, and must have been more or less apparent to earnest men in all periods of the world's history. Moral progress consists not so much in the discovery of new principles, as in the deeper penetration into the meaning of principles already voiced in the past, and in their more consistent and thoroughgoing application to the changing social order. Indeed, originality, as some one has said, means thinking for oneself, not thinking differently from other people."⁸ Given Kohlberg's view and what Dean Knudson has said, it would be very unlikely that any religious faith which did not ask one to look for universal principles of justice never reaches the highest level of ethical behavior.

William Stringfellow, an attorney and also an ethicist, states, "...Biblically speaking, the singular, straightforward issue of ethics...is how to live humanly during the fall. Any viable ethic -- which is to say, any ethic worthy of human attention and practice, any ethics which manifest and verify hope -- is both individual and social. It must deal with human decision and action in relation to other creatures, notably the principalities and powers in the very midst of the conflict, distortion, alienation, disorientation, chaos, decadence of the Fall."⁹ In other words, it must begin where people are -- now. This means,

if one is truly aware of what Stringfellow is saying, one must not look to the past (i.e. Catholicism's insistence on the 14th Century as the greatest century possible) nor to the future (Fundamentalism's "pie in the sky, when I die, later on by and by) but to the present for the answers. To look only to the past or only to the future for answers to ethical questions concerning human beings invariably dehumanizes the persons living in the now. The Protestant hymn, "Once to Every Man and Nation," has the line "New occasions teach new duties ...that makes ancient truths uncouth." Stringfellow then points out that the question becomes "How can a person act humanly now." There is no way to act humanly without becoming implicated with all other human beings, without ever assigning to any of them the role of "other." There is no way that using 14th Century logic, rationalism, or "natural law, that someone will not fall heir to the role of "other," be it the poor, females, racial minorities of whatever kind, sexual minorities, etc. So long as that construct exists, someone will suffer because it is based on ideas that are no longer true. We recognize that our being in the imago dei is in being more than rational mind. We are incarnate and to think otherwise is to deny the incarnation of Jesus. We are flesh, blood, emotions, appetites -- and from the Protestant view, at least, so was Jesus. To condemn humanity to dualism, in which the rational is good and the physical is evil, is to deny the wholeness of the incarnation and the wholeness of creation in which God looked at the creatures and pronounced them tov. Here is the essential evil -- or unethicalness -- of the natural law theory. It condemns the physical and all that that stands for to the realm of sin and punishment and that is basically a Level I way of looking at life. It is ethical, but only barely. For the church to maintain people at this level is totally out of keeping with modern thinking on how morality or ethics develop within the person. Additionally, Reinhold Niebuhr points out that "Reason may

not only justify egoism prematurely, but actually give it a force which it does not possess in nonrational nature."¹⁰

Knudson reminds us of the essential ethical emphases in Protestantism: i.e. the sanctification of the common life and the social application of Christian ethics, which change diametrically the thrust of Christian ethics away from the Catholic perspective of moral theology. Therefore, virginity was not honored above marriage and the contemplative life was not holier than the active. Protestants became more convinced through the centuries that they had a duty to bring about the kingdom of God on earth; society was plastic and could be changed and if society could be changed, people could be also through transforming their surroundings. Natural law did not hold in the Protestant statement. Since humanity was transformable by the forgiving love of God, the "unconditional love" of God this promise of grace was the great leveler, it could be appropriated to anyone.

Social reform and liberation became inherent in the Protestant conception of social ethics. Here the two ideas tie together. If social reform and liberation are the highest forms of ethical Christianity, then the ethical Christian is not so concerned with private pietism and good behavior as with bringing about the dominion of God on earth. Many things could bring about this dominion; i.e. population control, thus not condemning huge hordes of people to poverty; peace movements; fair labor practices; and all of the movement which became known in Protestant circles as the Social Gospel. (See Appendix A. P.9) In many instances, the great divergence between what is considered ethical behavior, even in the private sphere, between Catholics and Protestants is centered in the differing vision of how to bring about the dominion of God. From this Protes-

tant's view, it is here that the personal pietistic faith of Roman Catholics and Evangelical Fundamentalists differ from the social gospel-oriented mainline Protestant denominations and why their views of moral theology and/or ethics are vitally different. All three see the dominion of God (the beatific vision?) in terms of their own theology and the differing views on how to bring that about and/or how to live in anticipation-expectation of the dominion's coming and when/where it will come (pre- and post-millennialism, for example) ultimately color one's concept of ethical behavior in the post-fall/pre-dominion now.

James Gustafson gives some insights into the process of becoming an ethical person as he describes Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of Christian ethics:

Ethics is knowledge of ourselves in relation to our knowledge of God. And self knowledge is no mere luxury to be cultivated during idle moments; it is essential to the responsible life. Its relation to the responsible life is not such that we can derive from our statements about ourselves further statements about what we are always to do; Niebuhr does not set out a body of propositions about the essential nature of man, and from that body of propositions formulate another one pertaining to what we ought to do. Self-knowledge affects our moral life in more complicated and subtle ways...Reflection on the moral life can help us achieve a unity, a first loyalty, a center of personal integrity. It does this by aiding us to analyze the variety of commands we hear, the conflicts of values in which we are engaged, and the relativity of all values in relation to the one ultimate Good. It aids us in our decisions about the relations of values to each other, about the course of our active life...He refers to the importance of hamartia of "missing the mark" as one aspect of our moral

predicament...Ethics cannot guarantee that one will always hit the mark, but it is an aid to accuracy. Ethics helps us to understand ourselves as responsible beings, our world as the place in which the responsible existence of the human community is exercised. (We) are not relieved of personal responsibility to exercise freedom, capacity for judgment and action in the world. ¹¹

H. Richard Niebuhr points out that both teleology and deontology have their problems, but the response oriented ethic which he envisions, suggests that the questions which need to be asked and answered are "What is going on?," "What is being done to me?" and then "What shall I do?" rather than "What is my end?" and "What is my ultimate law?" He goes on to say that our actions are responsible not only insofar as they are reactions to interpreted actions upon us but also insofar as they are made in anticipation of answers to our answers. ¹²

Niebuhr's response-oriented ethic is located at at Level VI in Kohlberg's scheme of things, and there are many levels in between, social contract, for example being at Stage 5.

Kohlberg has further delineated the reasons for right behavior and the social perspectives of the stages in these ways:

Level 1. Avoidance of punishment and the superior power of authorities.	<u>Egocentric point of view.</u> Doesn't consider the interests of others or recognize that they differ from the actor's; doesn't relate two points of view. Actions are considered physically rather than in terms of psychological interests of others. Confusion of authorities perspectives with one's own.
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Primarily, most churches demand Level I to Level III thinking of their adherents, and there is so much more. Natural law, like Level I thinking,

holds actions as "purely physical rather than in terms of the psychological interests of others." Included in Level 2, although not mentioned here, is the concept that we are loyal to "our group" and our group's way of thinking and the us/other concept, which so many churches deplorably maintain.

Level 2.	To serve one's own needs or interests in a world where you have to recognize that other people have their interests, too.	<u>Concrete individualistic perspective.</u> Aware that everybody has his own interest to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualistic sense.)
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Level 3.	The need to be a good person in your own eyes and those of others. Your caring for others. Belief in the Golden Rule. Desire to maintain rules and authority which support stereotypical good behavior.	<u>Perspective of the individual in relationships with other individuals.</u> Aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations which take primacy over individual interests. Relates points of view through the concrete Golden Rule, putting yourself in the other guy's shoes. Does not yet consider generalized system perspective.
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This is the level of the "good Christian" kind of thinking which is ordinarily taught in our Sunday Schools.

Level 4.	To keep the institution going as a whole, to avoid breakdown in the system, "if everybody did it," or the imperative of conscience to to meet one's defined obligations.	<u>Differentiates societal point of view from interpersonal agreement or motives.</u> Takes the point of view of the system that defines roles and rules. Considers individual relations in terms of place in the system.
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Utilitarianism, unfortunately, seems to rank higher on Kohlberg's scale than does most of Christianity.

Level 5.	A sense of obligation to law because of one's social contract to make and abide by laws for the welfare of all and for the protection of all people's rights. A feeling of contractual commitment, freely entered upon, to family, friendship, trust and work obligations. Concern that laws and duties be based on rational calculation of overall utility, "the greatest good for the greatest number."	<u>Prior-to-society perspective.</u> Perspective of a rational individual aware of values and rights prior to social attachments and contracts. Integrates perspectives by formal by formal mechanisms of agreement, contract, objective impartiality and and due process. Considers moral and legal points of view; recognizes they sometimes conflict and finds it difficult to integrate them.
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This is the Hobbesian contract society into which people enter as atomic individuals, making partial commitments to each other for the sake of limited ends or maintenance of certain laws.

Level 6. The belief as a rational person in the validity of universal moral principles and a sense of personal commitment to them.

Perspective of a moral point of view from which social arrangements derive. Perspective is that of any rational individual recognizing the nature of morality or the fact that persons are ends in themselves and must be treated as such.¹³

Here, I believe, is where the church fails, because it does not treat human beings as ends in themselves but rather dehumanizes them, not recognizing the actual needs of actual human beings may be different from person to person, and that therefore persons have the necessity of making responses with full thought toward what the consequences of their actions are, but nevertheless, not making them in response to something "out there," but rather to something "in here." In effect, this is the Protestant ethic which says, "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to God's action" and could be thought of as deontological, but Niebuhr has already separated it from deontology in claiming that the deontological equivalent to his statement would be, "Obey God's law in all your obediences to finite rules."¹⁴

Liberation ethics (Swomley, 1972) says that "all people are involved in evil, by which is meant anything that keeps people from becoming genuinely free, whether that thing is a social structure, an inner drive to attain authority over others, or some addictive personal habit. Everyone is to some degree corrupted by sin, which is the acceptance or willing of such unfreedom. Liberation ethics does not accent the transformation of systems that new men free from sin will emerge...However, the way society is organized does condition human conduct, and

humans can be improved by membership in a society that respects each person as a brother or sister." Our word freedom contains, from its origin in freon, the concept of rights belonging to human beings who are dear or loved (the same root gives us friend) because they are not considered as tools. Anyone whom we genuinely love must be free to realize his selfhood or to pursue his potentiality to the fullest. Love is the affirmation rather than the possession of another. Liberation requires freedom for the individual in a free society.

Liberation ethics...emphasizes a life style or orientation of respect for persons...It is much more concerned with changing systems than in sustaining the rules of outmoded structures, although it recognized the validity of rules and laws which are intended to enhance respect for human life and seeks to strengthen them...It emphasizes a redemptive or liberating style of life made evident preeminently in the activity of Jesus but also demonstrated in the social action of Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and others who gave their lives for human liberation.¹⁵

Swomley goes on to describe liberation ethics as embodying a kind of love which is not sentimental, but which recognizes the price one pays for engaging in the liberation of human beings through suffering and self-denial. It also refuses to inflict more violence on those caught in the system because the real enemies are the systems that demean and dehumanize all of us. Poverty, racism, and estrangement are powerful inducements to respond to what is happening to one in ways that may seem unethical if one is standing outside, but which may seem highly ethical to the one caught in the system. Liberation ethics proposes that the prescription which gives real direction to conduct should be based on

redemption, which is defined as "liberating persons from anything which enslaves them." That which is good functions redemptively, that which is bad does not. If all people who are oppressed refuse to support nonredemptive systems, liberation would be at hand, and the dominion of God would be on earth. As was pointed out earlier, one's view of ethics is colored by one's view of the dominion of God. Ethics could be Christian if it would support that which is redemptive and deny that which is not. Such a simple categorization would entail deciding what is redemptive, but one should be able as a Christian to look at the life of Christ and from that draw conclusions as to what would be redemptive in the framework of Christ's teaching, but more importantly in the way he himself conducted his life.

Ethics could be Christian beginning with the idea that Christians would need first to see each other in redemptive light. Anything which is done to another which is not redemptive/liberating must be put right. The church would be a good place to start, if we could convince the system that it was first of all nonredemptive. After that, the dominion of God comes easily.

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